

June 1999
The FrontLine Supervisor
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Q. I work closely with my employees in order to help them improve performance, but I worry about "burnout" in the line of work we do. What can I do if an employee complains of burnout or appears burned out to me?

A. Burnout is a term commonly used to indicate that an employee is experiencing physical and emotional exhaustion evidenced by loss of enthusiasm for the job and inability to recapture interest in the work. No matter how pushed by the supervisor to change, the employee does not seem to come around. Supervisors should refer employees to the EAP when they demonstrate performance problems that don't improve. Although burnout is widely written about, it is not a recognized medical diagnosis. The symptoms supervisors attribute to burnout can indicate a variety of medical or psychological problems, including depression and nutritional problems. The greatest danger in deciding that an employee is burned out is believing not much can be done about it. Organizations may be tempted to transfer such employees to less demanding jobs or adapt to their decreased performance levels. An EAP referral is appropriate.

Q. Performance evaluations are required every year for our employees, but a good evaluation doesn't mean an employee will reap any financial reward. Under such circumstances, why bother with performance evaluations?

A. A common myth is that performance appraisals aren't worth much if upward movement in the organization isn't possible or if there is not a financial reward for the employee. Performance evaluations have many other payoffs for both employees and the organization. An especially beneficial payoff is the ability to point out strengths and weaknesses in performance. Good behavior can then be encouraged, and below-standard performance can be corrected. Most employees have a strong curiosity to know how well they are doing. There is a natural human need to be praised, and the evaluation process allows this to occur formally. Without a performance appraisal process, supervisors are left with the influence they hold in relationships with employees as their sole means to encourage or correct performance. This is highly problematic and contributes to morale problems.

Q. In our department, we have a large group of male employees who get along well, but sometimes they tease each other and engage in barely tolerable practical jokes and horseplay. Should I be concerned, or is this just "boys being boys?"

A. The fact that horseplay can contribute to larger, more costly, problems caused the U.S. General Services Administration to make it illegal at every federal worksite and inside every federal office building. Horseplay includes practical jokes and similar deliberate acts that violate safety standards or good sense and that can lead to injury or death. Perpetrators of horseplay often deny aggressive or malicious intent, but the effects of horseplay are frequently consistent with that intent. Workers' compensation may not pay for injuries resulting from horseplay because it may be ruled "non-job-related." This makes it important for managers to discourage horseplay, and not accept it as

normal for the work group or work culture. An employee who violates established work rules or codes of conduct by engaging in horseplay would be appropriate for a referral to the EAP.

Q. I understand and appreciate the EAP's role, but aren't some employees simply poor performers? Certainly, poor performance can't always be explained by a personal problem that can be counseled or treated.

A. Not all employees with performance problems have a treatable personal problem to explain it. On the other hand, something always explains poor performance. Inability to perform to standards can be caused by health/life problems, attitudes, beliefs, qualifications and aptitude, lack of knowledge and experience, or even environmental factors. Some of these can be difficult to identify, but any could be considered a "personal problem." The question is, "Can some intervention occur to help an employee with a performance problem meet required standards?" It is the EAP's job to help answer this question. Some supervisors who can't identify a clear personal problem jump quickly to conclude that a deficient work ethic, or other unshakable character trait not amenable to corrective action, explains the performance problem. A critical task is to avoid this conclusion at the expense of not making an EAP referral that could have worked.

Q. What does the latest federal research say about the prevalence of heavy alcohol and illicit drug use among different types of industries and occupations?

A. The latest information is available in *"Drug Use Among U.S. Workers: Prevalence and Trends by Occupation and Industry Categories,"* May 1996, published by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Workers in construction and food preparation and waiters/waitresses reported the highest rates of current and past-year illicit drug use. Heavy alcohol use followed a similar pattern, although auto mechanics, vehicle repairers, light truck drivers, and laborers also have high rates of alcohol use. The lowest rates of illicit drug use are found among workers in the following occupations: police and detectives, administrative support, teachers, and child care workers. The lowest rates of alcohol use are found among data clerks, personnel specialists, and secretaries. Many factors influence these statistics, and no industry should assume immunity or be less concerned than another about its risk for alcohol and other drug problems.